PRESS AND OPPOSITION IN THE NOVA SCOTIA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

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There are some givens in a parliamentary system of government, and one of these is that opposition parties in a majority government "are never going to be able to outvote the government on any policy proposals....(Therefore they) must content themselves with using subtler techniques to attempt to influence policy."[1] One such effective means is by using another of the democratic institutions, namely the press, to create opposition to the government. The press is not a party with candidates in quest of electoral success, nor is it held together on the basis of a fundamental political ideology. Then again, there is some question if even our parties are held together by ideological ties, but that is another matter. Members of the press are not found on the floor of the Legislature in heated debate either defending or attacking government policy. Yet the members of the Legislative Press Gallery play a fundamental role in the political life of this province, as they do in every other province or state in every liberal democracy around the world.

The press, it is said, is vital to the democratic process. "Without media coverage the safeguards of the parliamentary process that exist to hold government accountable are largely empty ritual."[2] Most people do, after all, get their knowledge and awareness of political issues and processes from media accounts, not by direct involvement in political activity. As one study for the Royal Commission on Newspapers put it:

> The gallery correspondents play an important role in deciding what aspects of the political process will be communicated to the citizenry, both by screening the information presented to

> them by government and the (opposing) parties...and by deciding which additional stories and features to pursue... They also provide an interpretation of events. [3]

As further testament of the importance of the press to the opposition, one of the more cynical observers of the political process in Nova Scotia had this to say:

> The House isn't as relevant for the opposition because they can't hold back bills. Tactics in the House are geared to get media coverage, to show how we would block bills if we could....The House is a forum where you know the press is going to be. Question Period is not so much to illicit information as it is to get issues to the press. We also try to embarass the government, as well as introduce our own legislative package....The whole thing is a game. The parties play to the press. The Government tries to control the agenda to look good while the opposition tries to present itself in a good light, and the government in a bad one. [4]

After all, "one of the primary responsibilities of a political party is to get elected. Without attention focussed by the media, you can't accomplish that goal." [5]

This paper constitutes an analysis of the relationship between the press (specifically the printed media) and the opposition in the House of Assembly in Nova Scotia from the perspective of opposition members and their communications staff. A random sample of interviews was conducted with opposition MLAs during the last week in August and the first week in September 1987. The goal was to discover what, if any, was the dynamic between the role of opposition parties and the press, what the role of the press should be (from the opposition's perspective), and how the press has fulfilled that role. Another goal was to find out if consideration of press reaction had any effect on the choice of issues to be raised, and how they were presented by the

opposition. These could be termed forward linkages for their effect is projected outward to the public. It was also interesting to look for evidence of reciprocal effects, that is, if press coverage had any effect on the mood of the opposition and the manner in which they conducted their business. These would be termed backward linkages, for they affect the functioning of the process itself. A complete interview schedule can be found as Appendix A. (Note: This paper deals specifically with the printed media, hereafter referred to as the press, but some of the statements made and the conclusions drawn can be applied to the media more broadly, including radio and television.)

There are several theories on how the press should operate. Liberal ideologists like Locke and J. Stuart-Mill laid the foundation for what became known as the libertarian theory of the press. Information would reach the consumer in a market free from government intervention, and every citizen was free to express his views and would do so. Grounded also in liberal ideology was the belief in the individual's ability to discern truth from untruth.[6]

> Given freedom to speak and to publish, men would express themselves. They would do so temperately and without capriciousness. There was no need to remind publishers of their public responsibilities; they would assume them without exhortation because of the moral sense which gave them their dignity.[7]

The libertarian theory of the press was highly idealistic and did not reflect the manner in which the press actually operated. The newspaper, because it existed in the private

domain without subsidization from government was, after all, a business. William Peter Hamilton, once publisher of the Wall Street Journal, said,

> A newspaper is a private enterprise owing nothing whatever to the public, which grants it no franchise. It is therefore affected with no public interest. It is emphatically the property of the owner, who is selling a manufactured product at his own risk.[8]

While the libertarian theory of the press fell into disrepute among elites, the post war era brought forth a different conception as to how the press should function. Theodore Peterson and Fred Siebert developed the social responsibility theory of the press in the late 1940's after the reports by the American Commission on the Freedom of the Press were released.[9] While this theory accepts many of the same principles espoused by the libertarian theory, it differs in one major way. The theory believes in freedom of the press, but adds that, "freedom carries concomitant obligations; and the press, which enjoys a privileged position under our government, is obliged to be responsible to society..."[10]

> They should provide a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events...and provide a general forum of comment and opinion....In exchange for its privileges, the press must not be so selfish as to promote only its own opinions. It must act in the public interest, promote wide discussion and knowledge of all viewpoints, and consciously prod the public to seek truth and responsible conduct.[11]

It was basically this theory which was widely espoused by opposition members interviwed. Ideally, the press will report the news of the political life of the province, will report

accurately and fairly, and will be objective. New Democratic Party Leader Alexa McDonough best summed up the feeling prevalent among the members:

> It is the duty of the press to be independent from political forces...They should be analytical and probe beyond what can be fairly superficial treatment of issues, by all of us, both in the House and especially in the Committees. In the legislative session, we are faced with the day to day pressures and it forces superficial treatment. Their big role is to take things into more depth. They should scratch through the superficial, self-serving rhetoric to get people to think things through for themselves....It is their job to report and to give the public some sense of what is going on in the public's business.[12]

This role, to be objective, analytical, informative and independent from political forces is especially important in situations of a large governmental majority, such as the one found in Nova Scotia today when forty one of fifty two members belong to the Government caucus. In a reduced majority situation, opposition parties have more capabilities to utilize in their roles as opposition critics, or shadow cabinets, thereby enabling them to provide a better critique of government activity through a more beneficial division of labour. But with only eleven members of the House in opposition (6 Liberal, 3 NDP and 2 Independent), critical resources are spread thin. The mathematics of the situation best explain this fact. During the 1987 Spring Session, for example, there were twenty one departments of government, and in the Official Opposition, six people among whom the responsibility of monitoring their actions was divided. The NDP had only three members, leaving roughly seven departments for each member. While the press should always be active as a check

on government, it is in times such as these when they should be even more vigilant and analytical to keep the public informed, and the government responsible for its decisions.

It was clearly felt that the press should consider itself a watchdog on government, and there were few complaints as to how the press discharged that role. "The press provides a valuable function by ensuring that all the faults of government are exposed."[13] Some dissatisfaction was expressed, however, with the press for not providing a holistic view of politics in the province. Jim Vibert, currently Press Secretary for Liberal Leader Vince MacLean, covered the House of Assembly and Nova Scotian politics in 1980 and 1981, in addition to the House session in 1983 and part of 1984 for the Chronicle Herald.

> The coverage is not what it should be. The press, like large elements of the media everywhere are more concerned with the entertainment value of what they relay to the public at large. They should be more concerned with useful information on legislative effects, and party positions on legislation....The press covering the House should be less concerned with the politics of the place and more with public policy. We need more in depth analysis and wide reporting on the legislation and laws that will govern the people of this province.[14]

So it appears that there is at times a schism between what opposition would like to see from the press, and that which the press provides. The differing roles, that of educator (what the opposition feels should prevail) and that of entertainer (that which the media feels is necessary to sell papers), need not be mutually exclusive, and in Nova Scotia they are not. The press does to some extent fulfill the educator function by reporting the activities of government and opposition in and outside the

House, as it fulfills the function of entertainer by relaying some of the more intriguing parts of Nova Scotia's political process. The question is one of balance between the two roles. Mr. Vibert feels that "there has been an evolution in journalism. The media is becoming more concerned with human interest and less with politics. They think that's what sells."[15] Ed Black, author of Politics and the News, wrote of the press:

> In this respect, they are certainly different from our formal political institutions. Where others have public and governmental concerns as their major reason for being, the so-called Fourth Estate is more concerned about profit, entertainment and audience-building.[16]

This educator-entertainer dichotomy is not unique to the Nova Scotian media, and it is not everywhere that there is a problem. The problem only comes when one looks at the availability of alternative sources of information. In an area where there is the market to support several papers, one usually can find the paper that best suits his or her needs. The papers themselves may range from purely 'educator' papers, to purely 'entertainer' papers (usually referred to as tabloids), or any mix between the two extremes. This is an optimum situation in which the consumer can make the choice, but this situation does not exist in Nova Scotia.

This province has essentially one daily provincial paper, the Halifax Chronicle Herald. The Mail Star, the Herald's sister paper, is an afternoon edition geared to the metropolitan audience. Although the circulation of the Daily News is building, it still does not rival the Herald. This fact alone

should place more responsibility on those who cover Nova Scotian politics and make it incumbent upon them to provide in depth, accurate, and analytical coverage. Publishers, owners and editors however do not necessarily ascribe to this philosophy when making decisions concerning what is and is not news of interest to their readers. And, as more than one person has observed of the members of the Press Gallery in Province House, "The reporters themselves are basically responsible but sometimes they get a bit complacent. There is not always a competitive drive, the Gallery is quite chummy." [17]

The 'chummy' characteristic of the Press Gallery may be a reflection of the size of the Legislature, the size of the Gallery itself, and the nature of politics in this province, but the effects of this characteristic are not unique to Nova Scotia. One author, writing of the Parliamentary Press Gallery in Ottawa, said:

> there are tendencies towards superficial coverage and conformity (pack journalism)...reporters respond to a herd instinct; when a group of them get together to share information or interpretations on any particular story, deviations from the accepted view are uncommon. It is more important, for most, to avoid being scooped than it is to strike out on their own. [18]

This same lack of competitiveness exists among members of the press covering Province House, and it results in incomplete coverage. This poses a problem for opposition parties in the House. Jim Vibert commented that:

> Members of the press feel that by telling the people what the government has done that their job is done. But the people have an equal right to know what the alternative is. This is not a phenomenon unique to Nova Scotia. It happens on a

> national scale, but there you can shop around. You can't do that here. The Chronicle Herald gives the Opposition page 7 for Op. Eds. (Optional Editorials), but they won't do it for them.[19]

This is a frustrating situation, for Optional Editorial writers are largely recognized as being affiliated with one party or another. There is also the added dimension of language in that 'editorial' connotes opinion, and is often identified with the opposition viewpoint, while 'news story' implies fact, while often there is a heavy reliance on official government information (which also may be subject to interpretation). This may be more of a systematic bias than a political one, but if the press is to play the role of educator and do what it can to better inform the public on political issues, it needs to present more than just the one side of the story.

To be fair, the press is good at printing criticisms of the government but they generally stop short of presenting the alternatives. Bill Gillis, Liberal MLA from Antiginish, stated that, "Matters brought into the House are reported not at all or superficially. It is not to the benefit of the people of this province who are not aware."[20]

While some complaints of incomplete coverage can be attributed to the pack mentality and the lack of competition now existing in the Press Gallery, this is not the only problem relating to political coverage. While there does not appear to be the blatant discrimination against alternatives that used to so aptly characterize our papers as 'Tory' or 'Liberal', the lack of information, the tone of the copy and the placement of stories or their omission all may have some effect on the voter, and have

the effect of giving more creedence to the status quo.

A survey of the Halifax press (The Chronicle Herald and the Daily News) was conducted during a two week period during the Spring Session to determine the quantity and quality of press coverage received by the Liberal party on the issues they raised in the House of Assembly. A list of issues was constructed from a reading of Hansard (the official reporting service of the House), for all Liberal MLAs over the two week period, and the papers were analysed for their coverage of the issues.

The most notable observation from the survey was the number of issues that had been raised by the opposition and responded to by the government, that appeared in the paper without mention of the opposition having raised the issue.[21] Perhaps by virtue of only printing the government's response, it was felt that the issue had received adequate coverage. But as stated before, adequate coverage should include more than one party's input. By not mentioning an opposition MLA's initiative in raising an issue, the story denied that MLA the opportunity to raise his or her profile in the eyes of the electorate who read the story. It also denied the reader the opportunity of insight into the legislative process by implying that the government volunteered the information itself without any prompting. Thus, by not according profile to opposition initiatives and alternatives, the public's conception of the political situation is deflected, as light through a prism, from the actual reality of the situation.

Some MLAs clearly had better results in getting their issues to the press than did others, as evidenced by ratios of issues

raised to stories receiving coverage. This can either be interpreted as those MLAs bringing up issues more deserving of coverage than others, or some predilliction which may or may not be politically motivated, on the part of those covering the House towards the MLAs. One staff member commented that, "Sometimes there is a slight bias on behalf of some members....A lot has to do with personality politics. They don't do anything out of spite towards members, but sometimes they just perceive some people as being more quotable than others."[22] Another added, "Political bias? No, generally, they're few. But reporters and editors are human, and sometimes personal relationships sneak into the copy. But most guard against it."[23]

While some MLAs expressed the view that occasionally members of the press exhibit personal bias in their copy, the majority who were interviewed felt that in general the press were fair in their reporting. Many of those interviewed felt that political reporters do not have an easy job, and that it is a very difficult task to be absolutely objective. E. B. White once wrote of journalists, "all writing slants the way a writer leans, and no man is born perpindicular, although many men are born upright."[24] Dr. Gillis echoed the sentiments of the elected members that, in general, the press were not biased in their coverage, but also that that coverage was imperfect. I wouldn't say it's a bias, but the coverage was not necessarily complete. It may be impossible to have compete coverage....Reporters are human and we all have our limits. [25] Mr. Vibert added this insight, gained from his years as a reporter:

> It is responsible journalism if you present the facts as you know them. You must present all sides of the issue, and make every reasonable effort to be objective. The majority of reporters do that. Where they fall down are the mistakes of omission, if they don't cover all sides of the story. Being a reporter is not an easy job, because you are pulled in different directions and people try to influence you.[26]

The general view was that bias, if it was present, came not at the reporting level, but at the level of the editor or the publisher. Mrs. McDonough best expressed the commonly held view that:

> the partisan leanings of the press come not at the reporting level of the story itself, but in the top level decisions concerning the placement of stories, the editorial decisions. We don't have lots of complaints about unfair treatment, more often than not it's by error of omission, things that don't get carried or are buried in the paper. Those are insidious and damaging.[27]

She went on to relate an incident in which a reporter for the Chronicle Herald was present at a nomination meeting for the New Democrats in Cape Breton. When the story did not appear in the Herald, the reporter was contacted and asked if the story had been submitted. The reporter in question claimed that the story had been filed.[28]

It is within the power of the publisher or the owner to decide the content of the paper, what stories are included and where they are placed. Whether by error of omission or intent, the story did not reach the reading public. An article concerning a well-attended nomination meeting could influence a non-comitted voter, and a party's fortunes could be buoyed in some way by positive reporting in the press. While this admittedly is speculation, for it has not been proven that the

press influences its readers and the media itself denies any ability to sway the reading public, the speculation itself still exists.

NDP Leader Alexa McDonough gave the issue of editorial policy on coverage an interesting twist:

> We suffer from the third party problem. Many media outlets look for the official opposition response, not the NDP. Frequently we were contacted by reporters, but they needed the official response. If they can't get the Liberal position, they don't print the NDP's position. This perpetuates the status quo, and for no fault of your own, you get bumped. Fortunately, this has changed somewhat lately. [29]

Another member added that while the media was not generally biased, there may be a "status quo bias that gives an edge to a status quo party."[30] This would seem to support the observation that the press relies on 'official sources' of information, and that editorial policy may provide a slant to coverage.

But one must be careful lest too much be attributed to the press. It is important to note that none of the members blamed their opposition status on any failure of performance on behalf of the press. "The press can create perceptions...They can exaggerate bad or good news, but they can't control it. Ultimately, if the message doesn't get out, it is the party's fault."[31] There are a number of methods used by the members and their staff to get the message out to the people. Some involve the press directly, and some do not.

Liberal MLA Guy Brown (Cumberland Centre), a fifteen year veteran of the House, attributes success with the media to the relationship he has established with them over the years.

> They want information and they need credibility. Never ask the media to waste their time on minor issues. They won't continue covering politicians if they take them down the garden path. They want to know that their information is accurate. Some people think I use them (the press), but I have built up a relationship. They have the opportunity to build it up too, but if they use the press they are going to be in trouble.[32]

According to Brown, getting an issue into the public forum means an expenditure of effort and research. "Some politicians think that if they issue a release, they should get coverage, and then the issue is over. But if issues deserve coverage, they deserve a follow-up. If it's not worth a follow-up, it's not worth the coverage in the first place. Politicians have to build issues, and sometimes it takes years."[33]

Mr. Brown brought forward the observation that the role of the press varies from the metropolitan area of Halifax to the rural parts of the province. He feels that there is too much emphasis on metropolitan issues, and that:

> universities and training institutes shold try to bring into more courses the importance of rural issues. When one is covering Province House, he should keep in mind that thirty out of fifty two seats are rural, talking of jobs and highways...Editorial writers too from the Halifax area don't understand the importance of the closure of a small school in a rural area...I don't blame the press, that's just the way it is. When you look at the sale of papers, the name of the game is profit, and the taxpayers don't subsidize the papers. Halifax circulation is likely 100 to 1 to Cumberland County.[34]

There is another source to which rural Nova Scotians can turn for issues concerning their areas. There are weekly newspapers in print in most regions and many towns in the province which cover more constituency matters, and MLAs often

use these papers to let their constituents know what they have accomplished on their behalf. Incumbent MLAs often put out monthly or bi-monthly reports on their activities both during and outside the legislative session. This, in addition to press releases given to weekly papers, gives the member a more direct link to his or her constituents. While this is not to say that local publishers, editors and reporters have no biases, it is to say that stories having local ramifications will be more likely to reach their intended audience through weeklies than through the provincial daily paper. A number of those interviewed feel strongly that these papers are an essential part of the effort to inform the public, and many make good use of the opportunity to send their press releases to the weeklies.

There are various other methods used both in and outside the Legislative Session to convey material and information to members of the press. Daily during the session, a press package is compiled containing all House Orders (requests for information from the government) to be tabled that day in addition to all Resolutions to be read in the House on that day. Issues are also raised in Question Period held on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, during debate on the annual Estimates, during speeches such as those given in reply to the Speech from the Throne, and also during Committee meetings. As one member put it, "the House provides a built in forum for presenting issues."[35]

Both inside and outside the Session, the press release and the press conference are used, the press conference being

reserved for the more important, perhaps more complex issues. Speaking of getting issues to the press, Mr. Vibert said that:

> There is an element of advance predicting that goes into the job in terms of how they will respond. You have to be innovative and offer them something different than press releases, but that is difficult due to the size of the opposition, the lack of resources, and the time constraints. You can't make everything into a media event, and I don't think we should.[36]

One alternative means of getting information out to the press is for MLAs to accept commitments outside the House. Speaking at community group meetings, for example, gives the MLA the unique forum to present what they perceive as the alternative to government policy. Again, accepting such commitments outside the House in itself is made difficult in a small opposition situation like the one presently found in the Legislature, for it is difficult enough keeping up with House commitments and constituency affairs with so few people responsible for monitoring the actions of government. At the same time, it is very important for the elected politician to keep in touch with his or her constituents, groups, and the public in general, and accepting commitments outside the House is one effective means of accomplishing this. One member commented that it was incumbent upon the politician to find or create a forum in which the press had no choice but to cover the event. One such opportunity is the party convention, as "it is the one time of the year to spell out alternatives. We set the agenda. We don't have that opportunity as much during the Legislative Session because the Government has greater resources.[37]

Even though the weeklies may carry an alternative perspective and the message may be getting out by direct contact with the public, the fact remains that the Chronicle Herald, Nova Scotia's only provincial paper, is more devoted to metropolitan issues. Part of this appears to be a budgetary problem, as a relative shortage of funds means that many political reporters do not often get outside Halifax.

> The press in Halifax is insulated and isolated. They lose touch. It happens with politicians too, losing touch with the people, but it happens with the media more. They don't have their finger on the pulse of Nova Scotia. The politician's success depends upon keeping in touch, the survival of the media doesn't.[38]

How much of a problem this is depends upon the extent to which the media influences people's attitudes, and whether or not the press influences which issues are raised by the politicians. It could be argued that the size of the opposition and their relative lack of resources accords the media more power in influencing people's attitudes. But while differing opinions existed as to how much influence the media exerts on the electorate, all agreed that the media are not in control. Mrs. McDonough, when asked about the power of the media, said:

> They are not in control...There wouldn't be any point for politicians to continue if they were. The press largely conveys what goes on, but the public doesn't accept everything. There is some scepticism. It would be best if the media were more critical analytically, but they go by what's pumped out to them. It is the public who is more critical. The media's tendency to be less critical is not absolute, but a matter of degree. The media here are not as extreme, they are typically Nova Scotian.[39]

In general, there was a positive attitude towards the

public's ability to read the press critically, and make decisions independent from outside influence. "The media is an influencing factor, but people are more sophisticated than the media and most politicians give them credit for."[40] One of the members put the issue into perspective:

> The media doesn't have as much control over the public as a party's propaganda has over the party member. Keep in mind that it is a small percentage of people who change governments. People could realize that the media has no say in the majority who are traditional party people. The media has some effect on those remaining, but anyone who blames the media is copping out. Parties at the local level have as much chance at affecting those people as does anyone else.[41]

Another interesting aspect of the relationship between the press and the opposition is the amount of attention given the task of handling or managing the media. One can perhaps glean some idea as to the importance attached to this task by the opposition parties by looking at the utilization of resources by both the Liberals and the NDP. Both parties apply the majority of their resources towards research capabilities, but it could be hypothesized that a difference in outlook exists between the parties on the media issue. The staff in the Office of the Leader of the Official Opposition includes two former reporters, one holding the post of Press Secretary to the Leader, and the other in the post of Research Coordinator. The question that undoubtedly was addressed at one point in allocating resources for staff was whether or not to hire a media expert. The Liberals seem to have placed more emphasis on media relations, especially in connexion with the leader, than has the NDP. But perhaps this is because they can more easily afford the resources.

There may be a plateau reached where adequate research resources are maintained, and extra effort goes into other things like experts on media relations. Still, however, there may be a difference in outlook relating to image politics. Alexa McDonough, when discussing the level of priority given to media relations in their hiring policy, commented that,

> There was a lot of debate as to whether we should hire an expert on the media. We decided that given the scarce resources we needed those with a primary orientation to research pubic policy issues and develop alternatives. The major chunk of our resources are dedicated to that cause....We need to know what we're talking about. The easy part is to get the attention, the hard part is being credible.[42]

Bob Levy, NDP member from Kings South, carried on in the same note:

> We tend to put more emphasis on the depth of research...If we could have one more person, that person would go to research. Maybe we're thinking that that will speak for itself, and only on particular issues will we go out and beat the drum. We don't operate around the press....Maybe if we can establish our credibility by giving good stuff to the press, they will come to us. When it comes to the press, credibility is everything. You may get the headlines one day, but if you're wrong....[43]

Mrs. McDonough added, "We spend lots of time trying to rationalize our approach to the press, but is there a rationale?"[44]

While this perspective seemed generally accepted in the New Democrat camp, there were differing perspectives expressed among the staff in the Liberal office. The members themselves generally expressed the view that, while the media is important, the most important aspect of their job was to see that the issues

were presented to the House on behalf of the people of the province. Staff, however, seemed more intent upon grooming their leader's (and their party's) image for the consumption of the media. One staff member commented that, "You need a strong staff in communications to build an image up...You can't totally manage the press, but you can keep a tight rein on things. You just keep the party in control, not the press...You manage the press by managing yourself."[45]

There is always some frustration involved for opposition MLAs when an issue they feel very strongly about does not get picked up by the press. This could happen for a number of reasons, not the least of which being that the issue would not make good copy. It was no secret that many of the reporters who covered the 1987 Spring Session at Province House claimed it to be the most boring session in recent memory. MLAs and their communications staff were asked if press reaction had any effect on which issues were brought up in the House, and also if it had any effect on the manner in which they were presented.

One staff member had this to say:

> We can't just look for sensationalist issues. While those might grab the headlines in the long run they won't do a lot of good. We have to come up with human issues, things people can relate to....That's what they remember at election time.[46]

Carrying on in the same vein, another added:

> We've done no scandalmongering. The press does an adequate job in identifying the scandals and mistakes of government. The opposition should be more positive and offer alternatives to public policy. But when you catch them doing things contrary to the public interest, you have the responsibility to let the people know.[47]

Mrs. McDonough presented some insight into the process that is sometimes necessary to follow when a sensitive issue is raised. Before such an issue is used for political purposes, it must be asked if the cause will be bettered. "There is some tension over whether to use issues which may constitute a scandal."[48]

> We back away from some issues because of it. Some say 'go for the headline', but you must be able to change the politics of the situation. Don't pursue it if all it does is create friction and no movement. In the broadest sense, we have to have an integrity about how we conduct ourselves. If I don't have integrity, I lose credibility as an alternative.[49]

Perhaps this is the greatest power of the press: the ability to help establish or help destroy the credibility of politicians. This realization of this power leads to a "self imposed pressure. You don't take a flying leap unless you can back it up."[50]

A number of those interviewed reached exactly the same conclusion on the question of whether the press affects the presentation of issues. That conclusion was that the issues that people remember at election time, and those issues that do well with the press are those issues with a twist of human interest. It was strongly felt that people remember those things that have been shown to affect them, or other people like them. This may be one means by which members can enhance their chances for exposure, by personalizing issues and showing how they affect the 'average' citizen. "Sometimes issues get too philosophical and difficult to relay to the public. There is some frustration that arises out of the inability to put issues into terms that people

will remember."[51]

In or out of the legislative session, the media plays a major role as a gatekeeper of information by deciding which issues will be presented to the public. One of the major concerns resulting from the lack of resources accorded opposition parties is that the opposition in the House be dependent on the press for their information. The extent to which the members depend upon the press for information in some degree is an amplifier of the press' gatekeeper function. It is a fault in the system that lets political opposition depend on the press both as an information source and as an information conduit, especially if there are shortcomings in the operation of the press. In this way, both backward and forward linkages exist between the press and opposition members, and one possible solution is to give opposition more access to resources.

> We have limited research resources. Sometimes we are forced to use the media more than is healthy. Opposition is a reactive position. You react to a decision or a lack of decision on the part of government seven times out of ten. It should be more fifty fifty. The press has an attitude that the opposition can't implement the policy, so why tell people about it? But the people have a right to know....If you were concerned with democracy, you'd increase opposition staff. Due to political considerations, the government gives you enough to get by....They won't give access to the government wire. Instead of costing the taxpayer $50 per release, which is what every press release costs, give us access to the government wire. It would cost no more, but would give comfort to the opposition. They like to keep you in the dark so you can't respond as quickly....It would be in the best interests of the taxpayer, but would it be in the best political interests of the government?[52]

There is a motivation other than the desire to make life in opposition more difficult that keeps government from pursuing

such a course of action. By keeping the opposition from immediate access to information, government reaction time is increased. This supposedly gives them more time to formulate responses to problems which may arise . While the advent of the electronic media greatly reduced the reaction time of liberal democratic governments everywhere, most have adjusted accordingly. But it seems that the desire still remains in Nova Scotia to keep the reaction time as large as possible for as long as possible to reduce the ability of the opposition. This leaves te opposition in the unenviable position of depending to some degree on the newspapers and other media, because the information is released to them first.

Sometimes issues are followed in the newspaper from start to finish. Extensive newspaper clipping files are kept up to date in each opposition office. The files cover departments of government as well as individuals and particular issues, and are referred to frequentlyas a source of information for the members and their staff. Whenever possible, information found in press reports is verified independently before being used. This is one way in which members try to balance their use of press information.

Sometimes the press breaks a story which the members then follow up on. Many members do not begin their day in Session without first reading the newspaper, but they try not to let the media dictate what will be the affairs of the day in the House. It is much easier for politicians to keep control of the political agenda during the session than outside of it, for the

House session focusses the attention of the media to some extent. Issues are presented in a forum easily accessed by reporters and journalists, and they pick from the offerings. Even if all the issues do not receive coverage, it is still the politicians who set the agenda by focussing on issues such as levels of social assistance or unemployment. Outside the session, the opposition has to create a forum to present the issues, and there are fewer opportunities available during these periods. It just so happens that these periods constitute three quarters of the time as the House presently sits for only three months per year.

It appears that the press helps to keep politicians working and humble. Although press coverage on a particular day or issue definately acts to buoy spirits, the press supposedly has no debts and if they can create a positive image one day, they can take it away the next. Clearly, it makes politicians feel good if they read positive reports about themselves and their work. "This applies to all caucuses....It puts you on a high for a couple of days but you fall quickly if you try to ride on that type of coverage." [53] Sackville MLA John Holme of the NDP said that, "As a caucus we'd like to have good coverage. If we are excluded, we reconsider our approach. But it doesn't make or break us."[54] As one member put it:

> Politicians have a tendency to read papers and put out press releases without knowing in the back of their minds just what type of coverage they want. If you do something, you have to have a reason. If you have thought it out and it is fair, you'll get the coverage you want.[55]

Generally, the opposition members of the Legislature felt

that they had received fair treatment at the hands of the press. There are times that the members feel frustrated, especially when they feel that they have a strong issue and perhaps someone else is getting more exposure than they are. But, as Bob Levy put it, "it's not necessarily the press that does it. Maybe it's your own performance. If you're not happy with the press, fifty-fifty it's your own fault."[56] Another member expressed much the same sentiment in relation to the survey conducted of press coverage:

> I may be the only one in a House of 52 that would say this. Some politicians expect the press to print what they want. You should go back and reexamine the performance. Who had the real story content?...I have always gotten fair and just coverage....It has not always been positive, but how can it all be positive? I just want them to be fair, and I do think we have fair media.[57]

It comes as no surprise that there was unanimity expressed on the question of television in the House. It was felt by all that the quality of the questions and answers given in Question Period would improve, that grandstanding would pass quickly, and that a better understanding of the issues by the public would be a direct result. Reporters and journalists too were firmly in favour of televising the proceedings of the House. In their 1982 presentation to the Select Committee on Rules and Procedures, the Nova Scotia Legislative Press Gallery Association (NSLPGA) said that:

> It goes without saying that modern day government has become more and more involved in the daily lives of all Nova Scotians. And with the growth of big government, many people feel very remote and isolated from its workings. Any step to open up the proceedings of government and the legislative process should indeed be encouraged and permitted.[58]

Dr. Gillis pointed out that, in some ways, it would make the job of the opposition member more difficult, because, "it would take more preparation to make people see that you are doing your job."[59] Mr. Vibert essentially summed up the prevalent feelings on the issue:

> Every avenue that can assist in painting a complete picture should be made available. You can never give too much information, but you can give not enough....It would improve the decorum in the House, and make Question Period a more effective forum.[60]

Televising the proceedings of the House would give the members a direct link to their constituents, which could help them overcome their reliance on the newspaper as a channel of communication. Televised House proceedings will not bring revolutionary change to the way Nova Scotians approach politics, but it will lead to a better educated voting public. It will not replace the newspaper or change the nature of the coverage. The forces that act to determine the coverage given by the print media will still be the same in the post televised era. Nor will it replace the radio or the six o'clock television news, but it will supplement all of these by giving a more accurate depiction of the political process to the viewer.

Essentially, there exists a symbiotic relationship between the press and the opposition parties in the Legislature. The press depends on the opposition for issues, while the opposition depends on the press to some extent for information, but more importantly, to deliver the message to the people. "It is the role of the opposition to get the issues to the people, and the press must report fairly, accurately, and completely. Without

it, it upsets the checks and balances."[61]

In Nova Scotia, there are some deviations from the optimal situation. Journalistic complacency and a predilictions towards politics as entertainment mean that public policy is given superficial treatment, and alternatives to the status quo are not given prominent billing. A lack of alternative sources of information means that, in some instances, pertinent issues are not reaching the public.

In the final analysis, opposition parties can positively influence that which is relayed to the public by researching the issues themselves, utilizing the resource of the weekly papers in the province to their best advantage, and adopting management techniques to avoid situations in which damage control strategies are necessary. While they can do nothing to ensure that the papers will present alternatives as seen by the opposition, they can use other avenues such as outside commitments and conventions to make their views known to the public. Television coverage of the House would give members a direct link to their constituents, and could do much to facilitate delivery of the message. While the relative disparity of resources makes some of these options more difficult, there is no lack of effort on the part of the members in opposition to get their ideas to the people.

The press in any democratic country is a powerful institution, and while they do operate imperfectly, it was felt that "when everything is considered, the press are fair and just towards all members of the House. It is a tightrope they have to

walk, and overall they do a pretty good job."[62]

Appendix A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. What do you perceive the role of the press to be in Nova Scotian politics
   a) during the Legislative Session?
   b) outside the Legislative Session?

2. What effect does the press have on your role as an opposition
   a) party?
   b) member?

3. What types of things do you look for in terms of issues? Is it in the back of your mind whether an issue would make good copy? What about scandals?

4. How do you present issues to the press?

5. How do you make things issues if the press are not interested?

6. Does the amount of press received by your party on any one given day affect the mood of the caucus? If yes, how?

7. Given your resources, how much do you depend on the press for your information?

8. Do you feel that the media is in control of the electorate?

9. Is the reporting of the proceedings of the House biased in your opinion?

10. Do you feel that the journalists covering the House are responsible?

11. Given the problem of the lack of public awareness (refer to article), how is it possible to overcome the lack of knowledge without placing a higher level of power in the hands of the media?

12. Should television be allowed in the House?

13. Would it make your job easier or more difficult? How?

14. How would you feel about television in the House if you were the governing party?

Appendix B

List of Interviewees

Guy Brown (L - Cumberland Centre)

Dr. Bill Gillis (L - Antigonish)

John Holme (NDP - Sackville)

Bob Levy (NDP - Kings South)

Alexa McDonough (NDP - Halifax-Chebucto)

Michael Redmond (Research Coordinator, Office of the Leader of the Official Opposition)

Jim Vibert (Press Secretary to Liberal Leader Vince MacLean)

ENDNOTES

1. VanLoon, R.J. and M.S. Whittington, The Canadian Political System: Environment, Structure and Process (3d Ed.), Toronto: McGraw Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1981), p. 622.

2. Resnick, P., Parliament vs. People, (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1984), p. 2.

3. Ibid., p. 2.

4. Most information used for this paper is a result of a series of interviews conducted with opposition members of Nova Scotia's Legislative Assembly, in addition to their staff. Some of those interviewed did not wish to be quoted. The interviews took place during the last week in August, and the first week of September, 1987. Further reference in these endnotes will simply be cited as "Interviews", succeded by the page number from the transcription.

5. Op. cit., Interviews, p. 5.

6. Black, Edwin R. Politics and the News, (Toronto: Butterworths and Co. (Canada) Ltd., 1982), pp. 23-24.

7. Siebert, F. with T. Peterson and W. Schramm, Four Theories of the Press, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1956), p. 99.

8. Ibid., p. 73.

9. Ibid., p. 75.

10. Ibid., p. 74.

11. Op cit., Black. p. 29.

12. Ibid., p. 15.

13. Ibid., p. 8.

14. Ibid., p. 7.

15. Ibid., p. 9.

16. Op cit., Black, p. 6.

17. Ibid., p. 6.

con't....

18. Ibid., p. 7.

19. Ibid., p. 7.

20. Ibid., p. 13.

21. Survey of press coverage on issues raised in House of Assembly by Liberal MLAs. Survey conducted over two week period, from 27 February to 14 March 1987. Papers surveyed were the Halifax Chronicle Herald and the Bedford-Sackville Daily News. Survey results available on request.

22. Op. cit., Interview, p. 6.

23. Ibid., p. 9.

24. Op cit., Black, p. 17.

25. Ibid., p. 13.

26. Ibid., p. 9.

27. Ibid., p. 15.

28. Ibid., p. 15.

29. Ibid., p. 16.

30. Ibid., p. 20.

31. Ibid., p. 23.

32. Ibid., p. 2.

33. Ibid., p. 3.

34. Ibid., p. 1.

35. Ibid., p. 13.

36. Ibid., p. 8.

37. Ibid., p. 17.

38. Ibid., p. 8.

39. Ibid., p. 16.

40. Ibid., p. 7.

con't....

41. Ibid., p. 3.

42. Ibid., p. 17.

43. Ibid., p. 20.

44. Ibid., p. 17.

45. Ibid., p. 6.

46. Ibid., p. 5.

47. Ibid., p. 8.

48. Ibid., p. 16.

49. Ibid., p. 16.

50. Ibid., p. 16.

51. Ibid., p. 17.

52. Ibid., p. 9.

53. Ibid., p. 2.

54. Ibid., p. 11.

55. Ibid., p. 3.

56. Ibid., p. 20.

57. Ibid., p. 2.

58. Nova Scotia Legislative Press Gallery Association (NSLPGA), Presentation to the Select Committee on Rules and Procedures, Nova Scotia House of Assembly, 14 December 1982, p. 2.

59. Ibid., p. 14.

60. Ibid., p. 9.

61. Ibid., p. 13

62. Ibid., p. 4.

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Books

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Other Sources

Interviews conducted with Opposition MLAs in Nova Scotia's Legislative Assembly. Interviews were conducted during the last week in August and the first week in September, 1987.

Presentation of Nova Scotia Legislative Press Gallery Association (NSLPGA) to Select Committee on Rules and Procedures, Nova Scotia House of Assembly, 14 December 1982.

Survey of press coverage of issues raised in Legislative Assembly by Liberal MLAs in two Halifax papers. Date: 27 February to 14 March 1987.